The Black Scholar
Journal of Black Studies and Research

ISSN: 0006-4246 (Print) 2162-5387 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtbs20

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To cite this article: John Oliver Killens (1973) Wanted: Some Black Long Distance Runners, The Black Scholar, 5:3, 2-7, DOI: 10.1080/00064246.1973.11431366

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00064246.1973.11431366

Published online: 14 Apr 2015.

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WANTED: SOME BLACK LONG DISTANCE RUNNERS

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IT IS AN INTERESTING phenomenon that we black folks, as a people, have produced some of the most magnificent athletes the world has ever known, but have produced very very few long distance runners. We've raised a whole lot of hell in the hundred and two hundred yard dashes. You watch the Olympics and you see nothing but black brothers up there at the finish tape in the sprints. We have the fastest getaway known to man or womankind. At the same time we have produced very few long distance runners. Long distance running, which requires planning, pacing, discipline and stamina, and a belief in the ability to win everything over the long haul. Lasting power is the name of the game.

When I mentioned this idea to my publisher, he didn't think too much of it. He told me, "John, you don't understand sports. The athletes are in it solely for kicks, and the sprints are where the glamor and the kicks are at. The distance is a bloody bore." I told my publisher that the kicks may very well be in the sprints and the dashes, but it was that last kick in the mile that counted. And that our struggle for liberation was indeed a *long* long distance race, for we are out for nothing short of winning the entire human race and we were up against a formidable foe, and to win this race would require planning, pacing, discipline and stamina, and a belief in our ability to win the long protracted struggle. Indeed we must construct one hundred year plans. Two hundred year plans. We must construct institutions for generations yet unborn. Black people live a hand to mouth existence and our planning for liberation tends to be from hand to mouth. But hand to mouth planning will not win the human race, will not topple this capitalistic white supremacy establishment, which is what W.E.B. DuBois was all about. I believe Dr. W.E.B. DuBois to be the most outstanding long distance runner of the twentieth century, or any other century for that matter.

The heroic struggles of the late fifties and the decade of the sixties were a series of hundred yard dashes with which some black minds and bodies thought and sought to turn the country around. Probably the first sprint was the great Montgomery saga, the bus boycott, coming as it did, after the historic victory by the N.A.A.C.P. in 1954 at the U.S. Supreme Court. Some of us thought the historic bus boycott would fundamentally change the country. Montgomery was a noble and a valiant struggle. Fifty thousand black folks, young and old, under the leadership of Sister Rosa Parks and Brothers Martin King, Ralph Abernathy and Richard Nixon (certainly not to be confused with Tricky Milhouse), stood and walked together in the very cradle of the confederacy, withstood the vicious violent attacks of white bigots, who all along had really thought they knew their "nigrahs." White folks did a lot of head scratching at the way their happy and contented "nigrahs" were acting up, and sticking together. I was there during some of the struggle. One old white-haired head-scratching white man shook his scraggly head

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by JOHN OLIVER KILLENS

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and told me, "They look like our nigrahs, but they doggone sure don't act like them. It's as if some other nigrahs sneaked into Montgomery in the middle of the night and took the places of our nigrahs. They look like our nigrahs," he repeated, "but they sure'n hell don't act like em." And he was as serious as a heart attack. The white folks of Montgomery were shaken to their roots. For to paraphrase Reverend Ralph Abernathy: "How could these unreconstructed crackers possibly know the New Negro when they did not even understand the old Negro who oftentimes grinned when he wasn't tickled and scratched when he did not itch?" The New Negro was all ages, eight to eighty and their theme was: "Walk together children—Doncha git weary!"

THE SECOND SPRINT was the Sit-Ins. Black young courageous people put their bodies on the line to integrate the two-by-four Southern restaurants, and *toilets*! Some of us thought that this would turn the country around. It didn't happen. It couldn't happen. Remember the eight young tender warriors of Little Rock? And Daisy Bates? Autherine Lucy? James Meredith? Then there were the heroic freedom riders, then voter registration, then the so-called "race" riots which I preferred to call "police" riots, since I firmly believe that many of them were provoked by the police and planned in the police stations to try out their new weapons and to waste some of our brave young black warriors, our valiant freedom fighters. Take a look at the statistics, of Watts, of Newark and Detroit. A lot of beautiful young people got wasted during those glorious times, and I am not now trying to negate their struggle or the importance of their contributions to the Movement. Indeed these struggles inspired freedom fighters around the world. And they were necessary and important phases in our development as a people in the war of liberation.

What I *am* saying is that some of us thought that one or two of these phases would topple the structure and destroy white supremacy once and for all. Well it was not about to happen that way. And when it did not happen, a lot of our young people got wasted, physically and psychologically. Some became disillusioned. Well, you do not become disillusioned unless you have illusions in the first instance. Some got disillusioned and went off into all sorts of mystical escape hatches such as new religious bags, astrology, name changing, witchcraft, blacker-than-thou champeenship bouts, and so on. Some of the mysticisms were divisive, at a time when unity was desperately needed; some of us came up with such ridiculous dogma as "putting the black woman in her place,"—"at home"—"in the kitchen"—"walking three paces behind her man." But the black freedom movement was and is for the liberation of all of us, men and women, and the whole attitude was a denial of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth and Gwen Brooks and Margaret Walker, my mother and your mother,

and all the other black women who have lent their love and strength to us down through the years. And the only way we can possibly win is for women and men to march hand in hand together down the road to liberation.

Some of us followed the white youth into their "Do your own thing bag," which was but another version of the terrible American tradition of every man for himself and do others before they do you. Yet another version of "rugged individualism," which was how the West was won, or lost, depending on your point of view. Some blacks tripped out to Haight Ashbury or down to Greenwich Village and joined white youth in the drug culture, seeking what they thought to be revolutionary insights. But "spacing" could reap us no revolutionary insights, since there are none out in space. And if "nation time" means anything, it means land, good sweet black earth; there is no land out there in space except possibly the moon, which the European has already staked out with the Star Spangled Banner.

Again, some of us followed the white youth into so-called generation gaps. Some young folks thought that nothing had happened in the Movement until two or three hours before or after they joined the issue. Black folk cannot afford the middle-class luxury of generation gaps. We need all the forces we can gather, men and women, old and young, united in this struggle. As I've said before, "Let the white youth have their generation gaps. Most probably it is the only humanistic thing they still have going for them."

YES, WE HAD ILLUSIONS. Most of us had. But black folks at this junction can ill afford illusions. Yet they still keep cropping up, such as the recent myth of Black Capitalism, which is yet another get-rich-quick finishing tape. What does the Negro want? Some black leaders have, historically, answered, *We want everything you got. We want integration.* Well if the U.S. of A is one great capitalistic whore house, I'll be damned if I want into it, and if this whorehouse is syphilis-ridden, I'll be damned if I want any part of it. I don't want a piece of the action. I want to change the action. And that is what William Edward Burghardt DuBois dedicated his entire life to. That is what this long distance runner struggled for. This is the race he fought to win.

But in the late fifties we were conned into thinking we were in a fundamental revolution. It was a time coming on the heels of McCarthyism, when the word revolution was anathema, a dirty word, the use of which could get you called before one of those Congressional Committees, and you could lose your means of livelihood. You could even lose your life. You would have thought that the phony Revolutionary War of '76 had never been fought. Then a clever white Establishment sage told the world and black people that what the rest of America did not understand was that the Negroes were in a revolution. I believe his name was Eric Severeid. And some of us blacks went around with our chest poked out saying, "Yeah! Like man we're in a revolution. Like man, we're revolutionaries."

The white boy had conned us one more time. Because you see if you are already in a revolution, you do not need to make a revolution. Even the venerable N.A.A.C.P. got carried away and came up with the over optimistic slogan: *Free in Sixty Three.* NO - WAY. And even though Martin Luther King must have known better, in the excitement and heady freedom wine we were consumed with in those days he came up with his famous speech. "*Three Little Words.* We want it *all*! We want it *here*! We want it *now*." He knew that powerful institutions like the U.S. of A. do not topple that easily.

I recall the last time I saw another great long distance runner of this century, who turned seventy five last April. I refer to that great black all-American, Paul Robeson. I said to him, "Brother Paul, to every black artist with a heart or memory, you are the Big Daddy and Dr. DuBois is the Big Granddaddy." And yet some of our young folk do not know Big Paul, the athletic, intellectual, artistic, masculine giant and genius of the Twentieth Century. We need our heroes desperately.

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I VIVIDLY RECALL the first time I was in Dr. DuBois' home and stared in respectful awe at a veritable library of books, an institution of black erudition, and underneath the title of almost every book was the name, W.E.B. DuBois, some of which were published in the 19th Century. It was an inspiring, though chastening experience. Here is what I mean by long distance running. For with his books he had constructed an institution that would stand against the ravages of time, would inspire generations to come and help them to understand the task that lay ahead of them. Planning, pacing, discipline, stamina, faith in the future and a black victory—in a Great Gittin' Up Morning. A portrait of a long distance runner. This was the man, W.E.B. DuBois. Lest I be misunderstood, when I speak of DuBois as a long distance runner, I am not alluding *only* to his great life's longevity, though that is certainly part of the portrait. I also refer to the institutions that he constructed: The Atlanta School of Social Work, The *Crisis* Magazine; the torch that has been taken and forged forward by Henry Lee Moon; I mean DuBois, a founder of the Niagara Movement, forerunner of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; I mean The Encyclopedia Africana which he began in Ghana at the age of 93.

And so in his tradition, we must evolve a generation of long distance runners, men and women prepared to pay some dues for their children's children's children's children. Our people have paid some terrible dues for us to have come to this place and this moment in time and space.

Another hundred yard dash which was an integral part of the smoking sixties was what I call the Rap Revolution, with apologies to our good friend, Brother H. Rap Brown. We were going to rap our way to liberation. As I tell my students at Howard University. It should be clear to one and all that the Rap Revolution is *over*. It should also be clear by now that we are not going to rap the white boy into liberation. But we did an awful lot of rapping during the sixties. If rap were uranium or dynamite, we would have blown this planet up to the moon, and spared this country the wasteful and perverted expense of the Lunar Module.

We are up against the greatest amassment of power and sophistication the world has ever known. Sophistication is a very important aspect of this struggle. It's the thing we have got to carefully watch. We rap about revolution, and they come up with the *Dodge Rebellion*. We call for Black Power and they come up with *Pucker Power*. The President of the United States of America comes before nation-wide television at Howard University and tells us, *We shall overcome*. Tricky Dick gives us back the slogan, "Power to the People!"

There must be men and women willing to do the unglamorous work of building for our posterity long distance institutions. So many of us are overly concerned with our T.V. images. Understand that if you are really T.C. Bing, doing some real long distance running, hundred year planning, you will probably get very little exposure over the Establishment's idiot box, which is just as well. Understand also that television belongs to the Establishment. It is its most powerful all-pervasive communication weapon. And the Establishment is not about to give a serious black long distance runner a weapon to defeat it with. The late Lorraine Hansbury once told me that her motto was: Whenever she got on television or radio to deport herself as if she did not want to be invited back. Sound advice.

THERE WERE SOME long distance runners constructing for their posterity during the last two decades, such as Hoyt Fuller, and his *Black World* and OBACI. Nathan Hare gave us the *Black Scholar* magazine. Vincent Harding and Bill Strickland worked tirelessly to give us the Institute of the Black World. From the inspiration of Dr. W.E.B. DuBois and Shirley DuBois came *Freedomways* magazine which has been maintained by the hard work and dedication of John H. Clarke and Esther Jackson. Brother Martin and Brother Malcolm were long distance run-

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ners, which is why they were gunned down so early in the race. There is an old Chinese proverb that says: "A man's life is like a candle in the wind." We must make every moment of it count for something. Never say you didn't have time. There is no more time on earth. Make sure of your priorities. Check them out constantly, monthly, weekly.

Nothing will take the place of hard consistent work. Planning, pacing, discipline, stamina, an undying faith that the future will be ours, but that we must work for it and we must take it. It will not be given to us. This is the meaning of DuBois' life. This is the profoundest meaning of what Frederick Douglass meant when he said, "Without struggle, there is no progress." When he said: "Men of color, to Arms! Who would be free must themselves strike the blow." DuBois' life was dedicated to the destruction of capitalism and its handmaiden whore, white supremacy. Black film exploitation to the contrary, we must not be the pimps for this whorish society. DuBois was committed to construct a society that would be man-oriented. We live in a society that is thing-oriented. Call it socialism, call it Pan-Africanism. Call it a cooperative society. Call it Nyerere's African Ujamaa. DuBois worked tirelessly for a society in which men and women would be the master of things and not things the master of men and women.

Chancellor Williams in his great book, *The Destruction of Black Civilization*, teaches us that white men came into knowing full well that their plans would not come into fruition in their time or in their children's children's time. But that eventually, Black Egypt, the cradle of civilization would be in white hands. White power would prevail.

I am certain that, by now, you know that when I speak of long distance running, I am not referring to the Olympics of the Penn Relays. I am talking about the nitty gritty unglamorous world of discipline, planning, pacing and the building of institutions that will be left as a legacy to our posterity, to black generations yet unborn. If I read Chancellor Williams right, he said that ancient African civilizations spent far too much time, energy, money and resources constructing pyramids and monuments to the dead and not enough for their posterity.

To set the record straight, I am not now, nor was I ever, an advocate of gradualism. Of course, we want it all! We want it here! We want it now! But to paraphrase Martin King: We must realize that fundamental change will not come overnight, but we must work as if it is a possibility the next morning. But we are mature enough to know that it ain't gonna happen that way. Gil Scott-Heron is right. The Revolution will not happen on television. One faithless cynical brother commented, "Maybe that's the only place it'll ever happen."

NOTWITHSTANDING, WE MUST keep the faith. We must believe in our people's will to survive and overcome. So many of our sprinters have run out of faith and steam and have fallen by the wayside. Some of our tigers and panthers of the roaring '60's have become toothless pussycats. They had illusions of a get-rich-quick victory, but did not have enough faith in our people and their strength and their indomitable spirit. And their will to win the human race.

Nevertheless, in the tradition of Preacher Nat and Denmark Vesey and Gabriel Prosser, W.E.B. DuBois, Paul Robeson, Martin King and Brother Malcolm, we must be prepared to pay some terrible dues for our posterity who are a hundred years away in time and space.

Everything points to the decline of this cancerous civilization; the loss of face and the loss of the War in Vietnam, the narcotics epidemic, the rise in flamboyant homosexuality, rising unemployment during a major war, the orbiting cost of living creating problems even for the middle classes. Go along New York City's honky-tonk Forty Second Street and the stench of decadence is all pervasive, overflowing onto the avenue. One can easily believe that here is a civilization heading gayly down the drain. Wish fulfillment could have some of us blacks believe that all we have to do is to sweat this one out. Stand still and watch it go. But there is ample evidence that some of us are determined to

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go down the drain along with it. But why should you go down with the sinking ship? You have never been the captain. Black men limping along in high heel shoes. The process hair-do creeping back into vogue. Glorification by black artists of the whore, pimp and pushers. Black people, this white whorehouse is rotting, cracking at the seams. Don't go down with it. Come, brothers, sisters, let's put our shoulders together and give it a shove. Remember the song of your slave ancestors. "If I had my way; If I had my way, lil chillun, I'd bring this building down!"

In a way, we must be like termites working consistently and sometimes quietly away at the foundation of the status quo which has ever been the bane of black existence. Like the man who swiped at the other man with a razor and the fellow said, "Ah! You missed me!" And the other cat answered. "Shake your head."

So let us fantasize a toast to William Edward Burghardt DuBois, greatest of long distance runners. Let us also toast a new generation of black long distance runners in their great and glorious tradition.

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